THE STORY OF SIMON VAN DER STEL

Chapter 1

Simon van der Stel was the tenth in order of Commanders and Governors of the Dutch East India Company's station at the Cape of Good Hope. Except for Governor Isbrand Goske — October 1672 to March 1676 — nobody between Van Riebeeck and Van der Stel particularly distinguished himself in service, or remained in office for many years.

Governor Goske, a high-ranking Army officer, was especially appointed for a short term to command the Cape when war broke out in Europe in 1672. It was he who vigorously went to work on the new fort, which had been started some years ago to replace Van Riebeeck's crumbling affair, but work upon it had slackened off. By 1674 it was far enough advanced to move into, and by the time Van der Stel arrived it had been given the grander name of 'Castle'.

Van Riebeeck was in office for ten years, the longest period yet of service. Simon van der Stel arrived on 12-10-1679 and was in his twelfth year of office when he handed over to his son Willem Adriaan van der Stel on 11-2-1699.

He was a man full of common-sense and energy, and he had been brought up in touch with public affairs. When he was born in November 1639 his father was Commander of the island of Mauritius (which the Dutch East Indian Company occupied in 1598), and after his death, and a youth spent in Batavia where his mother re-married, he sailed for Holland in 1659. He married a young woman of good family whose father was mayor of Amsterdam. She did not accompany him to the Cape.

In person he was neither tall nor handsome (or so we are told — we have no picture of him), but he had a frank and wide-awake look about him. He was courteous and witty, and one of those men who understand leadership. As you may imagine, people liked him.

What were the conditions of the Cape settlement when he took over? What needed doing? How was he to make progress which the Company's Directors expected of him?

Well, his was no easy task. Almost his first action was to make a tour of inspection. He had in mind the need to expand the settlement if farmers were to be given a fair chance to do well. Had not Van Riebeeck, when he thankfully left the Cape, stated that the soil of the Cape Peninsula was unsuited to wheat-growing, the most important of agricultural products? Was not a very large amount of rice still being imported form Batavia for distribution among needy burghers, because not enough wheat was grown for bread?

Moreover, Van der Stel knew the burghers to be discontented. Only three years before, in 1676 when the Commissioner Verberg, a few months before Goske's departure, visited the Cape, they had presented a petition

to the Commissioner, such as the freemen long ago had presented unsuccessfully to Van Riebeeck. They wanted free trade. They wanted to sell to one another freely; to export their own produce, and to import goods for sale as merchants, and to command their own prices. They even offered to pay the Company a tax for this freedom. Again it was refused.

However, Governor Goske and the Commissioner did what they could. Goske himself had been the Commissioner of 1671 and understood the position. Verberg procured from the Directors leave for men to farm outside the Cape Peninsula. Goske had already brought about the completion of the idea, suggested before his time, that the Hottentots Holland country should be taken over by the Company, and the freemen granted lands there. A fortnight after Goske had arrived as Governor he had 'bought' from a headman, willing to co-operate for a trifling purchase price, not only Hottentots Holland but also "the whole district of the Cape including False Bay, Table Bay and Saldanha Bay." A solemn legal document recorded this transaction.

Commissioner Verberg established a cattle-post at the foot of the pass over the Hottentots Hollands mountains, and put a superintendent in charge with a handful of soldiers and slaves. The superintendent's name was Lorentz Fischer, which became translated into Dutch as Lourens Visser. He was an able man, and conducted bartering expeditions over the mountains to the Hottentots of the River Zonder End country and the Langebergen. On the 31st January 1678 two men in partnership, the senior man Henning Husing (who was to become very successful), were granted grazing land on the Eerste River. They were to supply the Company with one tenth of their breeding stock, and forty sheep twice a year. Another partnership of two were granted leave to set themselves up in the Tygerberg country (now Parow).

On his tour of inspection Van der Stel was particularly pleased with the partnership on the Eerste River. He thoroughly explored this river country, and decided that he would found a village there. He wasted no time. The first farmer had betaken himself there before the end of the year. In the following May eight families in a procession of waggons travelled to the site to occupy the land they chose, and to build their homes. The head of each family was promised as much land as he could cultivate. His land would be freehold, and he would pay tithes in produce.

Two years later followed another and larger party. Van der Stel had called his village *Stellenbosch*. It was to become in time one of the most beautiful country towns in the colony. Van der Stel always had its interest near his heart. He arranged that Stellenbosch should have its own Burger Militia, and its own Burger Council. He was particularly anxious that the militiamen should be well trained and good marksmen. He also arranged that Stellenbosch should hold an annual fair and market. It started on October 1st, and lasted a fortnight. On the last day, the 14th,

which was his birthday, he always visited Stellenbosch if he could manage it. The great event of the day was target shooting for the militia and other residents. Visitors were also welcome to take part. A pole was fixed up in the centre of a large circle, and on the pole was fixed a stuffed parrot. (A *papegaai.)* The competitors were mounted on horesback and armed with pistols, charging past the target at a gallop.

In 1683 Stellenbosch got its first little school and schoolmaster. The Directors of the Company agreed to pay for building a large hall as a schoolroom, and for a teacher's house. It was very simple teaching, just reading and writing and a little arithmetic. The children also learnt what the Church ordered them to be taught of the Bible and Catechism to prepare them for Church membership. They left school at the age of thirteen. The teacher also acted as lay-preacher, and took the services on Sunday until Stellenbosch was given its own ordained minister.

Van der Stel now turned himself energetically to the examination of trade. He found that some months before his arrival the Acting Commander Crudop had introduced a new system of dealing with imported wines and spirits. The right to sell them was put up for auction, and the highest bidder was given the monopoly of selling what he bid for. Milling and making bricks came under the same sort of arrangement. As time went on other products and activities were auctioned. In 1680 Van der Stel added Cape wine to the list though it was not yet very good wine. He himself was to take the lead in producing good Cape wine. Acting Commander Crudop had leased part of the *Rustenburg* lands to a freeman who was now producing wine, and Van der Stel ordered the licence holder of Cape wine to buy all this man's output.

To make sure that the Company was always supplied with enough butchers' meat had always been difficult. Nobody could be depended upon but Husing and his partner. There was not a satisfactory bid to be had except from them. Shortly after he arrived Van der Stel gave them the monopoly of the butchers' trade for three years. They had to supply meat wholesale to the garrison, and to the public twice a week at a fixed price. They were put under oath not to buy stock from the Company's cattle-posts or from herdsmen. Van der Stel gave them a plot of land on the sea-front near the Castle, and the Company paid for the erection of a pent-house where everyone was to be allowed to sell home produce in trifling quantities. They were also allowed to sell these things about the streets.

When Van der Stel brought Cape wine into the auction market he must have feared that farmers would lay down too much of their lands under vines, so he proclaimed that they might plant only one morgen of vines for every six morgen of grain. Wheat! He warned them that the import of rice as a substitute had to stop! They must grow enough wheat for the Company's supplies of bread and for their own. That was not easy. When Van der Stel arrived at the Cape the population of

burgers, and the 'knechts' they hired from among the soldiers of the garrison to help them on their farms, amounted to only 117, and 133 men slaves who were not all working on their farms. However, his warning had effect. In 1684, after two good harvests, wheat was exported to Batavia for the first time. (It was disappointing to hear later that the Council at Batavia was not impressed. Batavia could buy wheat more cheaply nearer home!) The Commissioner for that year, Rykloff van Goens, son of the Van Goens of Van Riebeeck's time, gave the farmers encouragement by letting them off paying tithes for the next two years. He also gave the burger Phyffer, who was running a fishing-smack between the Cape and Saldanha Bay, the monopoly of supplying the company with fish. At Saldanha Bay by this time waved the Company's V.O.C. standard from a little guard-house. It was set up in Governor Goske's time.

Local trade was not the only trade in Van der Stel's mind. The Directors of the Company, having been given reports of copper to be found in Namaqualand, wished Van der Stel to enquire into the possibility of copper mining. Other riches might also be found there. The Portuguese legend of Monomatapa still lived — the story of a rich city, of a great river, and of a clever people.

In 1681 he sent the Hottentot headman 'Captain' Kees with an invitation to the Namaquas to send a deputation to visit the Castle. At the end of the year the Namaqua visitors arrived with their wives, their pack-oxen and moveable huts, and, to Van der Stel's delight, a generous offer of smelted copper ore.

Through his interpreters he questioned them about Monomatapa, but for the most parts they shook their heads. They declared that they knew of the great river, and of a clever people whom they called Briquas, but that was all. (Actually, the great river was the Orange, or the Gariep as it was then known, and the Briquas were Bechuanas.) He was, however, sufficiently encouraged to send out an expedition from the garrison. Its commander was the Ensign Olof Bergh whose descendants live in the Republic today. A month later the party was back, the country so parched with drought that it had been impossible to continue the journey. They had struggled as far as the Groene River.

This failure had not discouraged Van der Stel. At the end of August 1683 he sent out another party, larger and better equipped, again under the command of Bergh and comprising of fifty-two people all told, ten of them Hottentots as voorloopers, herdsmen and interpreters. Among the garrison men were miners, a surveyor or two, and men capable of keeping an accurate record of events. (You will find the journals of both Bergh's expeditions in Volume 12 of the *Van Riebeeck Society's* publications, together with an excellent map.) They crossed the dry Doornbosch 'river', a tributary of the Groene River, and a Namaqua headman was persuaded to guide them over the hills into the valley under the Kamiesberg range. There matters came to a halt. Bergh went out himself, and also sent other

men, to find a pass over the Kamiesberg, but without success. The Namaquas warned them that to go ahead was useless. All the year it had rained only once, and nothing but drought faced them. Actually, there was a way round the range, and, though it was true that drought threatened any further effort, it was equally true that the Namaquas wished to see the last of them. The party turned for home on 1 October and reached the Castle on 24 October.

In the following year a garrison force went out under the command of Ensign Isaac Schryver to trace runaway slaves whom the Namaquas were said to be hiding. Twenty burgers were allowed to join the garrison men as runaway slaves concerned the burgers as much as the Company. Again there was failure, and the reason clear enough. Namaquas would not provide guides or any help. One headman told Schryver: "You Dutch are masters at the Cape, but the Namaquas are masters here!"

With all this, Van der Stel had found time for matters other than trade. In March 1682 he sailed in the station's yacht *Noord* from Table Bay to False Bay. It was necessary to organise safer anchorage for the fleets during the Cape winter, from May to August, when the north-west wind was a serious menace to shipping. Goske had also examined False Bay in his time, with the French in mind, and had set up a look-out post on the strand at Muizenberg. Van der Stel took surveyors with him so that the Directors might be sufficiently informed about the place. He entered an inlet in the bay, which had been named *Yselstein Bay* by the skipper of a little ship which had anchored there. Van der Stel and his surveyors decided that it would make a safe anchorage, but there were drawbacks — a lack of sufficient fresh water as far as they could discover, and a stony and difficult journey along the coast. Provisioning ships would be a problem. Perhaps he thought, too, that its loneliness would be unpopular with ships' people. In any event, the Directorate, or the surveyors in Holland who advised them, were not satisfied with the survey sent to them by Van der Stel. However, he gave the bay his own name, Simon's Bay. Not until 1741 was Simon's Bay established as a winter anchorage, and only after more disasters in Table Bay and a search for other anchorages.

Another of Van der Stel's concerns was the provision of sufficient timber and fuel for everybody's needs. There had never been sufficient timber at the Cape within reasonable reach of transport. Constant proclamations over the years had forbidden the chopping and lopping of trees without a licence to do so, and had described the situation of the Company's forests; no licence to enter these forests could be obtained. Moreover it cost so much to import timber in the Company's ships that the Directors were always reluctant to allow it. In 1683 Van der Stel put three burger sawyers in charge of the forest at Hout Bay. He gave them a contract to supply the Company for ten years, and permission to supply other people who had taken out a licence to purchase from them.

He proclaimed the old rule that nobody was allowed to chop down wood for himself. "People," he remarked, "have no regard for the damage they do."

He gave a valuable and lasting inheritance to the Cape by his creative attack upon this problem. Every man to whom he granted land in Stellenbosch he bound to plant a certain number of trees. He applied the same rule to the other grants when he chose to do so, and got sensible men to see his point and to co-operate. It is to Van der Stel we owe the oaks of Stellenbosch and Constantia, and of later villages which came into being and followed his example.

Presently, he enlarged a tree nursery at the Company's place *Rustenberg* at Rondebosch, and sent out from there literally thousands of saplings for planting on new lands, and to renew old destruction in the forests. He also repaired Van Riebeeck's old road to Hout Bay, which eased the problem of transport.

Further, he began without delay his great work on the Company's garden, which was to become known all over Europe, bringing celebrated botanists to see it, and to collect seeds and specimens from all over the countryside.

Chapter II

On 19 April the signal flag on Lion's Head (whose signallers could see 30-40 miles out to sea) ran up its mast, and the signal gun rang out, followed two hours later when the ships came in sight of the signallers on the Lion's Rump, then in turn Robben Island, and lastly the Castle, welcoming the Company's outward-bound fleet. It carried a distinguished visitor, the President of a Commission whom the Directors had elected to examine and report upon the affairs of the Company in all its dominions. The President's name was Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein, and his title the Lord of Mydrecht.

You may imagine how interesting his discussions were to be with a man of Simon van der Stel's good sense and energy. The Directors, not for the first time, had come to the conclusion that the Company should be rid of husbandry, of the garrison's bartering with the Hottentots for stock, and the charge of cattle-posts. The burger farmers should take the whole responsibility of agriculture and stock raising, and satisfy the Company's needs and their own.

Van der Stel resisted the idea of a total hand-over to the farmers. It was too soon, he said, for such a change. In the first place he was as convinced as Van Riebeeck had been in his time that to hand over from the garrison to the farmers the bartering of stock from the Hottentots was unwise. Irresponsible men could, and did, cause mischief by ill-treating the Hottentots, and by wandering away on their own. Even men who could be trusted had no certainty as yet that they could produce unfailing supplies of stock for the Company's needs, whereas Hottentot

headmen known to be friendly to the Company, whom Goske had entitled 'Captains' were bringing in cattle in increasing numbers to the Company's posts. Van der Stel had encouraged them, and increased the number of posts. Klapmuts, which he established in 1683, was now the most important.

Mydrecht saw Van der Stel's point. There had been talk among the Directors of emigration to the Cape or to the island of Mauritius in order to increase the sources of supply, but nothing as yet had come of it. The most contentious item of trade among the farmers was the meat trade. Henning Husing still held the contract to supply the Company, and the right to buy stock from the farmers. They complained that he paid them too little. (What he often did was to take over poor stock and fatten it up. He was a first class stockman, which at this time few of the farmers were.) The farmers also complained that the Company bred stock at its cattle-posts, thus reducing their market.

Mydrecht called for bids from the farmers to take up the contract to supply the Company with meat for the next three years. As before, there was no farmer who could outbid Husing. (Ten years later he still held the meat contract). In Council, Mydrecht decided that the farmers should be allowed to slaughter stock of their own, and to sell it in the old market-place on the foreshore where in 1665 the freemen were first permitted to sell small quantities of garden and dairy produce, and a little meat, at retail prices fixed by the Council. This was to check their selling in their private houses. In the market, too, there would be inspection so that no unclean food should be put on sale.

Mydrecht also examined the regulations and effect of the various organisations which dealt with the daily lives of the people: the Church Council, the Orphan Chamber (founded in Goske's time), which cared for the property inherited by children, and for children left unprovided for; the Court which had charge of the marriage laws; the Burger Council whose duties were largely municipal; and the Board of the Burger Militia, which had its own burger officers under the supreme command of the Captain of the garrison. Mydrecht approved of all these organisations. The Political Council, of which the Governor or Commander of the Cape station was president, its being the Council which ruled the Cape under the orders of the Directors of the Dutch East India Company, Mydrecht increased in number from six members to eight. To the High Court of Justice Mydrecht made a very real improvement. He ruled that the two eldest Burger Councillors should in future become members of the Court. This was one of the steps forward in burger history, giving the burgers a higher standing in their own community. Mydrecht also confirmed the foundation by Van der Stel in 1682 of a Court of Petty Cases; a Court to deal with less important legal matters. It was necessary, Van der Stel felt, to save the High Court of Justice much time in dealing with less important affairs. Van der Stel had appointed two burger councillors to

sit on his Court of Petty Cases, an arrangement of which Mydrecht also approved.

Finally, there was the problem of slaves. The number of slaves was steadily increasing. Men slaves more than ever outnumbered their masters. It had not been unusual for burgers to free slaves, or to get rid of one or other of them for other reasons, and the Directors of the Company at one time had the idea that it would be a good plan to gather freed slaves together into an agricultural community of their own, but the plan failed. So many of the freed men became idle and mischievous. A rule existed that Christian baptism, and the ability to speak Dutch, gave a slave the right to freedom. This rule came from the Council at Batavia to which the Cape was subject at this time. It was not a good rule because a selfish slave-owner might for this reason prevent the baptism of his slave. Mydrecht ruled that slaves brought into the country from abroad should be freed after thirty years of service, and that slaves born in slavery at the Cape should be freed after forty years. The rule still held good that the slave to be freed must be a baptised Christian and able to speak Dutch. The exception was made if a slave was untrustworthy and likely to behave badly as a free man or woman. It was then better for the public and for themselves that they should remain under the descipline of the owner. The Company's slave lodge was now at the garden end of the town, built there by Van der Stel when the too cramped and delapidated old slave lodge near the Castle was burnt down in 1697. Every slave child in the town had to attend the slave school there up to the age of twelve, and received a Christian education and ordinary elementary schooling. European children, for want of sufficient classes of their own, had been attending the Company's slave school. This, Mydrecht forbade, a decision in all likelihood prompted by Van der Stel. He disapproved of Europeans old and young, other than his staff, in the slave lodge. It was now also determined that all children born in slavery of white fathers should be given their freedom as a right, a man at twenty-five years of age, and a woman at twenty-two.

Mydrecht also introduced control over violent punishment of slaves by their owners. He ruled that serious cases of wrong-doing on the part of slaves should be reported to the Fiscal (Public Prosecutor). The owner was not to take the law into his own hands.

Another matter of discussion between Mydrecht and Van der Stel were the attempts already made to discover more about Namaqualand copper, and other riches which might be discovered in the north-west. Was the Company on the verge of becoming masters of Monomatapa? At any rate, Mydrecht urged Van der Stel to head an expedition himself, and gave him leave of absence from the Cape to do so in the near future. The Secunde (second in command to a commander or governor) would take charge in his absence. We shall hear more of this presently.

As they sat in the Commander's quarters in the Castle they also discussed the work which Van der Stel was engaged upon to complete

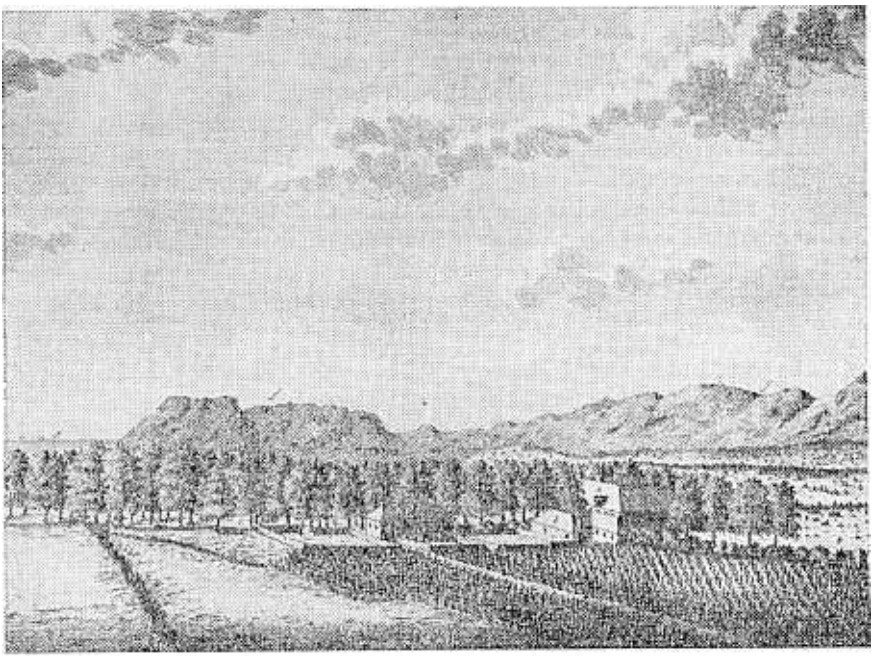
the building of the Castle. The Acting Commander Crudop in April 1679 in Council had named the five bastions: Orange, Nassau, Catzenellenbogen, Buren, Leerdam. The great cross wall (the 'kat') stretching from one side of the battlements to the other, was being built now, and Mydrecht urged its importance as a second line of defence behind the sea-fronting bastions. It was immensely thick, built of stone and lime, 12 foot at the bottom, tapering to 10 foot in the middle and to 8 foot at the top. When Van der Stel arrived at the Cape he had found the wall two-thirds of the way up and eventually completed it. He also closed the old gateway facing the sea, and built the gate on to the parade which we use today. This went up in 1682. Houses for the Commander and the Secunde backed onto the wall facing this gate, and on the other side of the wall the well-house was built, and later the vaults for storing grain. Ten years hence he was to report to the Directors that the 'new great hall' in his house, where until the church was completed in the middle of the Heerengracht (Adderley Street today), the church services were to be held. (That would not be until 1704).

From the social point of view Mydrecht's most important action was to approve Commissioner Rykloff van Goens's grants of land to senior Company's servants. Mydrecht could have cancelled this new departure in the Company's policy, but he did not. The senior Company's servants had complained with justice of their low salaries. They could not live in the comfort they should be able to do in their position. In the East Indies the Company's senior servants found opportunities to return home wealthy men, for there was wealth to be found in the East, and in one way and another they got round the Company's rules and regulations. But at the Cape there was no wealth, no population but its own small community and the savages. The Cape from a money-making point of view had a bade name. Men neither wanted to serve there, nor, if they came, to remain for any length of time.

Later on, these grants of land, and the competition of the Company's servants with the farmers, was to rouse the farmers to rebillion, but there is no doubt that the possession of land in the hands of men who had the money and education to provide enough equipment, and to be able to experiment, did set an example in dealing with agriculture in the best way. In doing so it also brought burger farmers of the better class and intelligence into touch with farmer Company's servants, as did the appointment later on of Company's Cape servants as Governors of the growing colony.

The grant of land with the most far-reaching effects, at the time and in future Cape history, was Mydrecht's own grant to Simon van der Stel of the better part of the lovely valley overlooking False Bay. Van der Stel named it *Constantia* after Mydrecht's little daughter who had died at Colombo in Ceylon. Here Van der Stel laid out the great vineyards which founded the fame of Constantia wines. Here, later on, he invited

two burger councillors to watch how Constantia wine was made, for the farmers, noting his success, had suspected him of using a secret recipé. The 'secret' of first importance was not to press unripe grapes!



Groot Constantia 1741
(from J. W. Heydt's Schau-Platz von Afrika).

Mydrecht's grant to Van der Stel expressed his own great interest in agriculture and botany, and his appreciation of the fine work which Van der Stel was already doing. We may recall, too, that it was no new thing to grant land to the Commander of the Cape. Van Riebeeck was granted land (with famous results), as were Commander Wagenaar and Acting Commander Crudop.

M. Whiting Spilhaus.